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An Interview with Professor Masako Hirai on her Career as a Shakespeare Scholar

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*With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come,
And let my liver rather heat with wine
Than my heart cool with mortifying groans.*
- Gratiano, The Merchant of Venice,
Act One, Scene One

With this quote from Shakespeare, I will attempt to write something that honors the contribution to Seijo University made by Professor Masako Hirai. I hesitated to make use of lines that referred to wrinkles, but this essay is written for a retiring colleague, and all of us past a certain age know that wrinkles, and thoughts of how to age well, are an inevitable part of the picture. The quote is apt because I know it expresses the positive attitude that Professor Hirai lives by.

I have known Professor Hirai since 1996 when I began work as a part-time instructor at Seijo University. Later, we both became members of the Faculty of Social Innovation when it opened in 2004. During those years, I knew she was a Shakespeare specialist and I was curious to ask her about her studies in this field, but the day-to-day business of work doesn't leave much room for interesting conversation about the aspects of our work that we love most. I never had time until recently to have an in-depth talk with her about her specialty. Ironically, it was her retirement that gave me a reason to have this conversation.

During the interview with Professor Hirai, I was curious to know how teachers in Japan could convey the power of Shakespeare to students who have a language and culture so distant from the setting of Shakespeare's creations. From my perspective, as a speaker of English with a heritage going back to England, Shakespeare's plays were challenging enough when I encountered them as a student. For me too, the plays were written in a challenging foreign language that only seemed to resemble modern English, and they were set in a foreign culture I could call "the past."

The challenge for the native English speaker learning Shakespeare for the first time is the Elizabethan language. Professor Hirai explained that this problem doesn't exist to the same extent for people reading Shakespeare in translation. The plays are always translated into modern Japanese, so much of the work of making them understandable has been done by the translator. There is no attempt to cast the language in an imagined Japanese language of the past because no translator would be able to guess the equivalent of Elizabethan English. Thus the Japanese audience is spared the frustration of English audiences who have to accustom themselves to the lexicon and rhythms of Elizabethan English, but the Japanese audience also loses the pleasure that comes after one has learned the language of Shakespeare. Nonetheless, I came away from the interview with the impression that Professor Hirai and other Shakespeare scholars in Japan have succeeded throughout their careers in bringing to their country a deep appreciation of the works of Shakespeare.

My interview with Professor Hirai follows, but the text is not a transcript. The questions and her answers were paraphrased from my notes.

Why did you first become interested in Shakespeare?

When I was a third year student at Seijo University, in the Faculty of Arts and Literature, I took a seminar with Professor Toshikazu Oyama. He was an eminent Shakespeare scholar, not only in Japan, but internationally. At the time, I was interested in Milton, and Professor Oyama said that was fine, but first it was important to study Shakespeare before any other writer. It was, of course, his plan to pull students toward his specialty and keep us there, and I can say that in my case, the

plan worked.

Was your first encounter with Shakespeare through translations or directly through the original plays?

We always studied the works directly through the original Elizabethan English. The first work that I read in that seminar was *The Merchant of Venice*.

When it comes to translating Shakespeare into Japanese, do translators render the texts into modern Japanese, or do they try to use an antiquated form of Japanese to represent 16th century English?

Definitely into modern Japanese. In most foreign countries, people read Shakespeare in their own modern language. Most Japanese readers wouldn't be able to understand 16th century Japanese, and modern scholars could not know how Japanese translators of the 16th century would have rendered Elizabethan English into the Japanese language of that time. Shakespeare is mentioned in Japanese records as early as the 17th century, but the first translations, by Keizo Kawashima, did not appear until 1868. In 1884, Shoyo Tsubouchi began staging many of the plays with the intent of staging them in a Japanese setting. Later, he was the first person to translate all of Shakespeare's works. The important thing for Japanese students and audiences is not so much the translation but the understanding of the rhetoric, imagery, history, philosophy and world view of English audiences of Shakespeare's time. When we studied Shakespeare, we had to study all of these aspects.

When did Shakespeare studies become a fully formed specialty in Japan?

It is difficult to say exactly when the specialty emerged. In 1884, *The History of World Theater* was published, and the next year there was a book on Shakespeare that was both a biography and a study of his works. In the early 20th century many more books appeared, and in 1903 *The Japan Society of Shakespeare* was established. As a door to the Western world, English literature became very popular in

Japanese universities, especially at Tokyo University. Many of today's Shakespeare scholars have 'direct lineage' to the early Shakespeare scholars of this time. That is, we are strongly influenced by who our thesis advisors and seminar teachers were, and we are also aware of the influence on them of their teachers, back through the generations to the first interpreters of Shakespeare in Japan.

There is a saying that the past is a foreign country. The plays are foreign enough even for modern British audiences. For Japanese audiences, do the plays appear to be extremely foreign, or are the universal themes easy to grasp?

In this sense, if the plays of Shakespeare were situated in Edo Japan, they would still seem foreign to modern Japanese audiences. This also means that Elizabethan England is equally foreign to the modern Japanese audience, or modern audiences anywhere. What seems foreign and strange is precisely what is appealing, but behind the unfamiliar we all perceive the universal aspects of human nature that Shakespeare always presented so well.

These days, young Japanese people don't seem to be familiar with Shakespeare's work. Was there a time when Japanese people were more familiar with the famous characters and plots in plays such as Hamlet, Macbeth and Romeo and Juliet?

Young people these days are less aware of classic literature of all kinds, but I still have hope that their interest could be revived by good teaching programs. There have been some successful adaptations recently of what is called "Shakespeare for younger children." Elementary students who have been introduced to these works have been very captivated by them.

Do you have a preference for certain categories of Shakespeare's work such as poetry, tragedies, comedies, histories?

The histories.

Is there one play that you can name as your favorite?

Even though I just said “the histories” as a favorite category, I say that because I focused on that category in my studies. However, my favorite play is *King Lear*. Professor Oyama believed that tragedy was easily grasped by Japanese audiences because their themes and conflicts were more universal. The histories require more knowledge of, and interest in English history. As for the comedies, their appeal is often based on word play and puns, and these don’t translate easily.

What were some of the areas you concentrated on in your research?

The histories, especially *Richard II*.

During your career at the junior college, were you able to inspire students to get interested in Shakespeare, or was it a difficult thing to make relevant to them?

For many years we rehearsed a single play all year long, and the preparation included a special retreat in Karuizawa. Of course, we did it all in English, and because it was a girls’ college, the situation was the reverse of Elizabethan theater where all the roles were played by men and boys. It was an all-female cast.

Do you have any favorites among the many cinematic interpretations of Shakespeare?

Michael Radford’s *Merchant of Venice* (2004, with Al Pacino, Jeremy Irons and Joseph Fiennes) and *Twelfth Night* directed by Trevor Nunn (1996).

You must have seen many live performances of Shakespeare during your career. Can you describe a memorable performance?

I saw *Twelfth Night* performed in London by an all-male cast. Of course, I knew that the plays were originally performed this way, but when I saw it for real it was

very impressive. At that time, I truly understood what it means to perform, create an illusion, and deceive an audience – all while thoroughly entertaining them.

What do you think of Akira Kurosawa's film Ran as an interpretation of King Lear?

With *Ran*, Kurosawa did a total remake of *King Lear* into a Japanese setting, and he did the same for *Macbeth* with *Throne of Blood*. In *Ran*, the story involves three brothers instead of three sisters because it is inconceivable that women could have been power players in Japanese feudal society. Otherwise, the story is the same, and it seems authentically Japanese to us. This shows that the political and social systems of the time were similar in both countries, and of course other aspects of the story, such as the relationships between the father and his children, are universal.

What was the focus of your research during the year that you spent in England in 2003-04?

I was interested in how the audiences varied over time. By the 18th century, going to see Shakespeare's plays had become luxury entertainment, but in Shakespeare's time the audiences consisted of all social classes. The common people sat in one section while the queen herself would be present in her own special seat. There were various attempts by the church to ban the theater, which forced many of the clergy to come in disguise.

If you could say something to young Shakespeare scholars, either Japanese or foreign, what advice would you give them about teaching the next generation about Shakespeare?

First, let them (or make them?) enjoy Shakespeare. I still find the plays interesting, but I have to remember that many people cannot easily find what is appealing. A teacher has to find one thing about the story that is relevant to the students' lives and use this to hook them into the rest of it. Once you've done that, you've got them for good.

My interview with Professor Hirai reinforced for me the understanding that we are not only saying farewell to a valued colleague, but that we also should not forget the essential place of literature in education. We often hear of the need to teach morals or ethics, as if we could prescribe what to teach and test knowledge of the subject with multiple choice questions. We might easily forget that literature – what Shakespeare called the “abstract and brief chronicles of the time” – has always been the best way to provide this so-called “moral” education. It doesn’t offer certainty, but it provides the best way for educators to let learners explore the moral dilemmas of being human. In the Faculty of Social Innovation, the curriculum was designed to give students an eclectic background in foreign languages, social sciences, economics and social policy. However, a place for literature is lacking, and I would argue that the general decline in literature education may be having devastating impacts. Literature has an important role to play in curbing the hubris behind grand engineering projects and other aspects of national policy. How much better off we might be if scientists, engineers and politicians had looked up from their narrow interests once in a while to remember how Shakespeare looked upon the human condition. I close with a few famous lines from Shakespeare that bear upon our recent Japanese “Ides of March” or “winter of discontent” that occurred in the year 2011.

*Our wills and fates do so contrary run
That our devices still are overthrown;
Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own.*

Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 2

*Merciful heaven,
Thou rather with thy sharp and sulphurous bolt
Splits the unwedgeable and gnarled oak
Than the soft myrtle; but man, proud man,
Dress'd in a little brief authority,*

*Most ignorant of what he's most assur'd—
His glassy essence—like an angry ape
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As makes the angels weep; who, with our spleens,
Would all themselves laugh mortal.*

Measure For Measure Act 2, Scene 2

*Swift as a shadow, short as any dream,
Brief as the lightning in the collied night,
That, in a spleen, unfolds both heaven and earth;
And ere a man hath power to say "Behold!"
The jaws of darkness do devour it up:
So quick bright things come to confusion.*

A Midsummer Night's Dream Act 1, Scene 1

*Now is the winter of our discontent...
And all the clouds that low'r'd upon our house
In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.*

Richard The Third Act 1, Scene 1

*Shall we their fond pageant see?
Lord, what fools these mortals be!*

A Midsummer Night's Dream Act 3, Scene 2

And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges.

Twelfth Night Act 5, Scene 1

*We all were sea-swallow'd, though some cast again
(And by that destiny) to perform an act
Whereof what's past is prologue; what to come,
In yours and my discharge.*

The Tempest Act 2, Scene 1